

# Clerics with Class

By Skip Williams



At first glance, the cleric may seem a bit lackluster -- a mere healing machine whose medicinal spells provide vital party support, but not much excitement. First impressions often prove false, however, and dismissing the cleric as the character "someone" has to play is a big mistake. A well-constructed cleric, played with fervor and understanding is not only an asset to the party, but an immensely satisfying character as well.

## The Pros and Cons of a Cleric

The cleric has a bit of everything -- decent combat skills, a wide range of spells, the ability to wear armor, and a few special powers. As such, clerics can play many roles in an adventuring group.

### Cleric Assets

When you chose a cleric, you gain access to the all-important healing spells, but the class offers other potent spells and some useful powers as well. Below are several assets you have going for you when you play a cleric.

- **Power over the Undead:** A good cleric can drive off or destroy undead creatures, and an evil cleric can make them stop in their tracks, or even obey his orders. A neutral cleric gets to choose between these effects -- but once that choice is made, he can't change his mind.
- **Good Fortitude and Will Saves:** A cleric uses the best save progression in the game for Fortitude and Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural mental and physical strength helps him resist most effects that fool his mind, assault his spirit, or attack his body -- including charms, compulsions, illusions, fear, polymorphing, poisons, and even disintegration. Furthermore, the high Wisdom score that a cleric needs for his spellcasting also gives his Will save a hefty boost. Few other classes can match a cleric's saving throw bonuses.
- **Good Spell Selection:** The cleric spell list is packed with lifesaving spells such as *slow poison*, *neutralize poison*, *remove disease*, and the ever-popular *cure* spells. He also has access to potent attack spells such as *spiritual weapon*, *searing light*, and *flame strike*, as well as excellent defensive and utilitarian spells. Better yet, he has access to the whole clerical spell list, not just those that he can place in a spellbook or master for a personal spell list.
- **Spontaneous Spells:** A cleric with a good alignment can spontaneously convert any spell he has prepared into a *cure* spell. This ability allows him to load up on flashier spells and then convert them to healing as his party needs it. Likewise, a cleric with an evil alignment can spontaneously convert any spell he has prepared into an *inflict* spell, so he always has a nasty surprise in store for his foes.
- **Domains:** Your cleric can make two choices from a wide variety of clerical domains, each of which gives him a special ability and access to extra spells. Domains are a great tool for customizing your cleric.
- **Good Armor Class:** A cleric has access to defensive spells that improve his Armor Class (such as *shield of faith*), as well as spells that can cause foes to miss him (such as *entropic shield*). Such spells combined

with the fact that he can wear any kind of armor and use any kind of shield (except a tower shield) mean a cleric usually has quite an impressive Armor Class.

- **Good Hit Points:** The cleric's 8-sided Hit Dice give him a fairly impressive hit point total.
- **Good Attack Bonus:** A cleric's base attack bonus -- +3 per four levels -- is second only to that of the more martial classes, such as the fighter. So if your cleric decides to enter combat, he can make a pretty good showing.

## Cleric Weaknesses

The cleric's many advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a cleric character.

- **Low Skill Points:** At a mere two skill points per level, most clerics don't accumulate many skill ranks, even with quadruple skill points at 1st level.
- **Mediocre Weapon Selection:** The cleric is proficient only with simple weapons. Most of the weapons in this category are fairly decent, but they're not the most deadly ones available.
- **Low Mobility:** A cleric's reliance on heavy armor makes him a slow mover on the battlefield.
- **Poor Reflex Saving Throws:** Clerics have the worst progression for Reflex saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, they aren't so great at getting out of the way when things get rough.

## Playing a Classy Cleric

Great clerics usually use the following techniques. So if you're playing a cleric, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

### Thinking Ahead

As a cleric, you have to make many of your most important decisions before an adventure begins. Your daily spell preparation has a big effect on how you play your character and what your party can expect to accomplish on any given day. Thanks to the wide selection of spells available to you, you can function as a detective (by loading up on divination spells), a medic (by loading up on healing spells), a combatant (by loading up on spells that enhance your fighting abilities), a ranged attacker (by loading up on combat spells), or a force multiplier (by loading up on spells that make your allies stronger). At higher levels, you may have enough spells available to fill two or more of these roles simultaneously.

When you choose spells, it pays to know what your party expects from you. You are among your party's most versatile members, and quite possibly the only one who can stand between a fellow party member and an untimely death. If your party expects you to play the role of combat medic and you're not prepared to do so, be sure to let the rest of the players know so that they can plan accordingly.

In any case, plan to stay close to the action so that you can intervene with a spell or physical attack when necessary. You're fairly hardy compared with other characters, and your group can easily go down to defeat if you're timid when the going gets tough. On the other hand, your healing ability makes you invaluable to the others, so don't be the first one to rush into danger, or even into potential danger.

## Your Friends are Your Best Weapons

You can have a big impact on the game by working through others, so be prepared to lend your support whenever you can.

**The Party's Main Fighter:** Whoever has to stand in the front line and handle most of the fighting will look to you for healing and other kinds of cures from time to time. If you're stingy with your healing spells, the adventure could be over more quickly than you think. A single *cure light wounds* or *cure moderate wounds* spell can keep a fighting character going, ultimately dealing more damage to the enemy than any of your other spells can.

**The Party's Scout:** Stealthy characters such as rogues, rangers, and monks often get in over their heads, so plan to be part of the rescue party that moves in to save them. You're also the one who must piece the scout back together after a mishap involving a trap or some other unseen danger.

**Other Spellcasters:** You probably have more hit points and a better Armor Class than the other spellcasters in your group, so try to stay close to them so that you can protect them if a foe breaks through the front line.

Whenever possible, try to coordinate your daily spell choices with the other spellcasters in your group. Your spell selection is almost certainly broader than theirs, so be ready to fill any gaps. Useful spells such as *detect magic* and *water breathing* are probably best provided by you, especially if you're a good cleric, since you can swap them out for healing spells if they're not needed.

## Be Your Own Best Friend

Your support functions make you useful to any group, but the game can become a drag if you always put others first. So don't let the other players push you around -- always insist on making decisions for yourself. Like any other character, you do need to put the group's survival first, but don't let the others dictate how you should do it.

## Some Key Equipment

A cleric's gear is nearly as important to him as his spells, so don't neglect it. Below are some essential pieces to pack.

- **Armor:** Plan to buy the best armor you can afford, and carry a heavy shield as well -- you'll never regret having a formidable Armor Class. And don't overlook other defensive items you can wear, such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*. Several lesser items whose benefits stack give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item.

If you do a lot of wilderness adventuring, consider some backup armor, such as a suit of studded leather (or a mithral chain shirt if you can afford it) to wear at night. If you try to sleep in heavy armor, you'll have penalties the next day. But if you sleep in your skivvies, you'll be in trouble if you're attacked during the night.

- **Melee Weapon:** You're pretty good in combat, so be prepared to fight. A heavy mace or morningstar packs the most punch. Alternatively, if you have the War domain and the right deity, you can get access to a martial weapon, which may be much better than any of the simple ones.
- **Ranged Weapon:** A light crossbow can prove as effective as a low-level attack spell against some

opponents. Use it when the opposition isn't threatening enough to merit the use of your spells. You might also consider a heavy crossbow -- a deadly weapon, even though reloading it is a slow process. That reload time might not bother you too much, though, because you might find that casting a spell or entering melee is more worthwhile than taking a second shot.

- **Backup Spells:** You never know when you'll run out of spells. Furthermore, you never know when you'll need a particular spell -- and need it very badly. So it pays to keep some spellcasting power in reserve via a collection of scrolls, wands, or both. Scrolls are a great way to carry along useful spells (such as *remove blindness/deafness*, *dispel magic*, or *remove disease*) that you might not use in every adventure. Best of all, if you have the Scribe Scroll feat, you can make scrolls yourself, though doing so uses up time, money, and experience points. Wands are useful for bread-and-butter spells that you use often, especially healing spells such as *cure light wounds*.
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## About the Author

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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